

Introduction

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Print-culture studies is a burgeoning field: it is actively fostered by bibliographical societies worldwide; centres for the study of the history of the book and material text have been founded, and several specialist book series on print culture have produced excellent contributions to the field. These series continuously demonstrate the need to revisit existing histories of print and to include alternative narratives that reveal hitherto neglected, often ephemeral print cultures. It is the recovery of these lesser-known print cultures that is essential for the mapping of cultural production in different knowledge economies and a better understanding of the role that print played in the fashioning of literature. Book-historical perspectives have helped scholars to investigate the cultural mechanisms affecting the production, dissemination and consumption of books in print form; as a discipline book history has expanded beyond the traditional focus on the material book to explore the social, cultural, ideological and economic processes underpinning an explosion of print in the eighteenth century. The flood of print matter that fed consumer demand and encouraged the consumption of all kinds of fashionable objects was closely linked with the rapidly developing visual cultures of society, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when innovations in the printing of illustrations contributed to creating a mass-culture of the visual not possible before. Print culture catered to, and shaped, readers' visual imagination, and literary texts were frequently illustrated. From the 1770s onwards, not only were illustrations issued in printed books, but print sellers produced a large number of affordable prints for collecting and a lesser number of expensive furniture prints (based on major artists' designs) for display in the home.

Illustration studies have become an important research area within current scholarship on print culture and a range of large-scale projects aimed at remapping the history of illustrations in eighteenth-century Europe, such as the *Database of Eighteenth-Century Book Illustration*, are under way. Equally, digital initiatives like *A Database of Cheap Literature, 1837–1860* and the *Database of Mid-Victorian Illustration* have contributed significantly to shedding light on, and to the understanding

of the importance of, corpora and illustration techniques that did not feature in traditional accounts of literature and book history. The ongoing *Oxford History of Popular Print Culture* acknowledges the visual as one of the principal forces for the widespread dissemination of literature and cultural literacy more generally.

The study of print culture and literature has in recent years been not only driven by the tireless efforts of institutionalised groups such as the international Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP) and journals such as, among others, *Book History*, *The Journal of the Printing Historical Society*, *Print Quarterly*, *Publications of the Bibliographical Society of America*, *Studies in Bibliography*, *The Library*, and *Word & Image*; rather, each of these journals has promoted different aspects of the study of print as cultural medium which, from the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century onwards, was appropriated by its promoters for purposes as varied as the religious edification of its users, the improvement of its readers by means of culturally relevant narratives, and the marketing of consumer goods through advertising. To date scholars of print culture have studied the mediation of complex messages by means of type, paper, illustrations and other paratexts involved in the making of mechanically reproducible print objects, but important archives (of paper-based ephemera and media of cheap print, but also of material providing insight into the lives and working practices of those individuals who were responsible for the design and production of print matter) have largely remained unexplored.

From the seventeenth century onwards print objects, as will be seen in this volume of Essays and Studies, could be issued in remarkably different shapes and formats, ranging from affordable editions of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (featuring religiously interpretive, iconographical narratives in the form of woodcuts or copper engravings) to chapbook versions of the same text. The latter were consumed by a mass-market of readers deriving cultural and religious literacy from redacted and frequently abbreviated versions of Bunyan's work. By contrast, the former accessed an iconographical tradition of religious dream visions that related the work both textually and visually to earlier allegorical productions. The changes that are deliberately introduced in the illustrations of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the interpretive matrix of these which forms the basis of Nathalie Collé-Bak's contribution to this volume add much to the meaning of Bunyan's text. As do, for Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, the errors that Laura L. Runge discusses in relation to its numerous editions and the ways in which editors affected the reading and reception of the work by retaining the errors of previous editions.

Not only do reprints and novel editions of one and the same text fix textual meaning but, at times, they also erase or obscure meanings by perpetuating errors; print thus serves the function of an agent of supposed semantic and representational stability, even though this fixing of meaning through the printed word may not reflect authorial intention, but compositors' or editors' misreadings and errors. The reconstruction of authorial identity and intention, as well as of the personae that authors fashion, which underpins traditional literary studies concerned with authorship, is made more difficult once books are published without an author's name or at the request of an author who takes on the financial risk of print publication by covering the printing costs of the work to be published. Alan Downie considers the little-studied practice of printing for the author and complicates common views on eighteenth-century authorship and the canon that have come under increasing scrutiny in the past thirty years. Gerard Carruthers examines the instability of print media in that they often do not occur as the sole objects containing textual information but are supplemented by paratextual material such as added leaves (bearing additional textual meaning) in interleaved copies. Carruthers studies a copy of the *Scots Musical Museum* that Robert Burns compiled and traces its history and mobility as an object transformed and edited by its successive owners who revised and reshaped the Burnsian *Ur*-text. The fluidity of textual existence demonstrated in the case of Burns's copy of the *Scots Musical Museum* is reminiscent of the textual condition itself as continuously morphing and autopoietic.

While book-historical studies concerned with textual production in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have, to a large degree, focused on material issued for the middle classes, systematic interest in cheap print media is a more recent phenomenon. Equally, the study of subscription editions, ambitious and costly ventures for which a certain number of subscribing supporters needed to be found before the editions could be printed, have remained neglected. The chapter on editions of James Thomson's best-selling long poem *The Seasons* in the 1790s investigates the ways publishers of the text recruited novel technologies such as colour printing to create commodities that promoted their editions as auratic rather than as what Walter Benjamin conceives of as the merely mechanically reproducible print object, which is devoid of aura. Peter Garside's contribution concerns itself with the illustrations of Sir Walter Scott's works; he produces a detailed history of illustrated editions and sheds light on the importance that publishers assigned to the

visual medium as a feature that could significantly advance a volume's or series' marketing potential and value.

Brian Maidment and Marysa Demoor's essays engage with print-culture genres – almanacs and Victorian periodicals – that are more ephemeral than the print media introduced by the other contributors. Focused on current affairs and day-to-day matters, the almanac and the *Athenaeum* do not promote the notion of literature as belles-lettres that Thomson's *The Seasons* embodied (as a result of which it featured prominently in the formation of the eighteenth-century canon); rather, the kind of Victorian almanac that Maidment examines is not prophetic or focused on providing a reference work on the agricultural cycle of the year, as earlier examples would have been. It introduces topical discussions, deploys the comic mode and visual satire frequently, and, as frequently, serves as a subversive means to question the validity of social distinctions and the power of institutions. Maidment's almanac is read as socially progressive and as invested with the power to affect readers politically in a way that traditional agricultural almanacs could not. Demoor examines a particular, hitherto neglected phase in the history of the *Athenaeum* and offers information on the editing, editorial practice and the refashioning of a dinosaur (her term) of Victorian print culture.

The subject range of this volume of Essays and Studies indicates some of the varied directions in which print-culture research is developing. While the contributors still use the history of the book and its methodologies to unravel the multifarious meanings and contexts of print culture, they also deploy tools derived from textual studies and visual culture research. It is this combined approach which makes possible the reconsideration of literature and print as not only limited to an artificial and monolithically conceived literary canon. Rather, the meaning and status of literature as an expression of cultural achievement is being redefined as the field of print-culture studies diversifies and 'rediscovers' neglected forms of print, all of which had specific cultural meanings when they were first produced.

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